DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 211 226 PS 012 601

AUTHOR Charlop, Marjorie H.; Sheehy, Nancy
TITLE Styles of Child Discipline: A Survey of Attitudes and Behavior.
PUB DATE Apr 81
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western Psychological Association (Los Angeles, CA, April 9-12, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adults; *Attitude Measures; *Corporal Punishment; *Discipline; *Parents; *Punishment; Socioeconomic Status; Surveys
IDENTIFIERS California

ABSTRACT

Three hundred residents of the Pomona Valley area, near Los Angeles, were surveyed about their attitudes towards child discipline techniques. The residents were also asked to report on the punishment methods they practice with their children. Results from 102 returned questionnaires indicated that most people were moderate in their attitudes toward various child punishment methods, agreeing more with the less severe forms of punishment (scolding and sending children to their rooms) and disagreeing more with the more severe types of punishment (spanking and beating). Negative correlations between people's attitudes toward punishment and reported punishment behavior was found, suggesting that what people believe regarding punishment and what they do are two different issues. (Author/MP)

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Styles of Child Discipline:

A Survey of Attitudes and Behavior

Marjorie H. Charlop and Nancy Sheehy

Claremont Graduate School

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ABSTRACT

Three hundred residents of the Pomona Valley area, near Los Angeles, were surveyed about their attitudes towards child discipline techniques. The residents were also asked to report on the punishment methods they practice with their children. The results indicated that most people were moderate in their attitudes toward various child punishment methods, agreeing more with the less severe forms of punishment (scolding and sending children to their rooms) and disagreeing more with the more severe types of punishment (spanking and beating). Of special interest is the negative correlations between people's attitudes toward punishment and reported punishment behavior.

INTRODUCTION

With the reinstatement of corporal punishment in many school districts and child abuse issues frequenting the newspapers, child punishment remains a salient topic of public interest. Social scientists have demonstrated a renewed interest in their research on child punishment. Child punishment has indeed become a focal point in research, with information regarding this topic accruing, but far from providing any complete pictures.

To add to the corpus of data, a survey was sent to residents of the Pomona Valley (near Los Angeles) on the topic of child punishment. Specifically, we were interested in the general styles of family discipline -- what methods of punishment most parents utilize to discipline their children. In addition, we were interested in people's feelings or attitudes toward various types of child punishment.

A survey questionnaire was designed in which the residents of the Pomona Valley were asked about their attitudes toward various methods of punishment (ranging from scolding to beating). In addition, those residents who have children living at home were asked to report on the types of punishment they utilize with their children. We were interested in attitudes toward child punishment, methods of child discipline utilized, and also the relationship between people's attitudes and their punishment behavior.

We were also curious to see if there were any differences in attitudes and behavior within ethnic groups, income levels, age, and sex. Additionally, the number of people living in the home was obtained to determine if this was related to the frequency and intensity of child punishment.

The survey and results (both discussed in detail in the following sections) have provided us with a foundation from which research on child punishment can be generated and perhaps contributory to the general literature on child punishment.

METHOD

Sample

Three cities from the Pomona Valley area near Los Angeles, California were included in the sample. These cities covered a range in income levels. The number of residents sampled from each of the cities was proportional to the size of that city. Pomona, the largest city with 85,500 residents comprised 43% of the total population. Ontario, the second largest city with its population of 70,600 residents contributed 36% of our sample. Upland, the smallest city, populated 21% of our total sample.

Our sample size was predetermined at 300. In order to obtain a probability sample proportional to size, we sampled 129 residents from Pomona (43% of 300), 108 residents from Ontario (36% of 300), and 63 residents from Upland (21% of 300).

The sampling frame for the 300 residents consisted of the city directories of Pomona, Ontario, and Upland, found in the public

library. The sampling interval for each city was calculated by dividing the total N for each city by the number to be sampled. Thus, it allowed us to systematically select people for our sample limiting the biases in selecting our survey recipients. Since probability sampling proportional to size was employed, a separate sampling interval for each city was used. The starting point of our selection process for each city was determined by using a random numbers table.

Questionnaire Design

The questions in the survey were designed to measure attitudes toward various methods of child discipline as well as different forms of discipline reportedly practiced in the home. In addition, demographic information for each respondent was collected.

Demographic questionnaire items consisted of city of residence, age, sex, ethnicity, marital status, educational level, occupation, total number of people living in the home, total number of children living in the home, and the children's ages.

Attitude questions focused on four different types of discipline: scolding, sending the child to his/her room, spanking, and beating. Respondents were asked to rate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with these methods of punishment under the following conditions: when the child was noisy, disobedient, or in trouble at school. A second set of questions was concerned with attitudes toward spanking a child in each of these three situations. Thus, respondents were asked to report their attitudes

toward each type of discipline mentioned above for each of the three situations. A total of twelve questions was designed to assess attitudes toward these situations. Each of these twelve questions had a Likert response format. That is, respondents were asked to check one of five responses provided: 1) strongly disagree, 2) moderately disagree, 3) neutral, 4) moderately agree, or 5) strongly agree.

Prior to the Likert type questions, a single question was included asking the respondents to indicate at what age they felt a child should act like an adult.

The final section of the questionnaire was completed only by those respondents who had children currently living at home. Respondents were asked to report how many times per week they practiced each of six different types of child discipline: 1) scolding, 2) having a heart-to-heart talk, 3) spanking, 4) put on restriction, 5) threaten with punishment, and 6) beating. Respondents were also requested to indicate the frequency in which they punished their children more severely and less severely than the six provided methods.

Because discipline styles are often dependent on the ages of the children, a final question was also included asking the respondent to indicate the age of the child that he/she was thinking of, when reporting punishment practices.

Questionnaire Package

Each respondent received a questionnaire packet containing the questionnaire, a stamped, addressed return envelope, and a cover

The cover letter insured confidentially of responses and encouraged candid and honest replies. Only the head of the household or spouse was requested to complete the questionnaire. Since there are many Spanish-speaking residents in Southern California, there may be a need for survey researchers in this geographic area to include a Spanish version of their questionnaire. In an attempt to assess such a need, a sentence written in Spanish was included at the bottom of the cover letter instructing Spanish-speaking individuals who do not read English to return the blank questionnaire.

Approximately two days after the questionnaire packets were sent out, a follow-up postcard was mailed reminding our sample to complete and return their questionnaires. Due to the lack of adequate funding, it was not feasible to send out an additional questionnaire packet as follow-up.

All respondents who returned their questionnaires did so within four weeks of the initial mailing. The questionnaires were coded and keypunched in preparation for data analysis. Occupation was coded using Duncan's Socio-Economic Index.

RESULTS

Response Rate

Of the 300 questionnaires sent out, 102 were returned. Five of these were returned blank by Spanish-speaking residents responding to our request. This is an indication that it may be worthwhile in this geographic area to distribute questionnaires in both English

and Spanish. These five comprised 5% of our total response rate. Our overall responses rate was then 34%. All further findings were derived from the 97 respondents who completed the qustionnaire. Of these 97 completed questionnaires, 41% of the total were returned from Pomona, 34% from Ontario, and 25% from Upland. These response rates from the individual cities were very similar to the percentages of questionnaires initially sent out. As you recall, 43% of the surveys were sent to Pomona residents, 36% to Ontario, and 21% were sent to Upland. Thus, the response rate from the individual cities was proportional to the population of the cities.

Demographic Profile

Our respondents ranged in age from 20 to 27 years old with a mean age of 41.6 (SD=15.8). Of our total respondents, 82.5% of the surveys were completed by Caucasians, 4.1% by Blacks, 7.2% were Mexican-Americans, 2.1% were Asians, 3.1% checked other, and 1% of the respondents did not answer the question. Female respondents comprised 71% of the return rate with male respondents contributing 28% of the questionnaires. One percent did not answer. The majority of our respondents were married or living together (73.2%), with 13.4% divorced or separated, 4.1% widowed, and 9.3% single.

The educational Level of our respondents ranged from no schooling at all to fives years of graduate school (x=13.5 years of school, SD=2.7). Our respondents seemed to be quite educated in that 86% were high school graduates, and, of our total, 21.6% had college degrees.

Analysis of occupational status revealed that 38.1% of our respondents were unemployed. However, this category consisted of predominantly housewives and retired individuals. Using Duncan's Code for SES, we divided the 61.1% employed into three categories: lower-middle class (22.4%), middle-middle (32.8%), and upper-middle class (44.8%). Thus, our respondents tended to be mostly from the upper-middle class income bracket. This is not surprising since overall, they were quite educated.

The number of people residing in the respondent's home ranged from one to seven family members ($x=3.1$, $SD=1.4$). The number of children in the home ranged from none at all to five ($x=1.2$, $SD=1.2$). The majority of respondents (59.8%) had children living in the home, with the ages ranging from infant (under one year) to 30 years ($x=10.4$, $SD=7.6$).

Our average respondent was a white, middle-aged, upper-middle class woman who was well-educated. Typically, she belonged to a small family consisting of herself, her husband, and a school-aged child.

In order to ascertain whether any of our respondents had unrealiztic expectations of children's behavior, we asked them at what age they thought a child should act like an adult. The responses indicated a continuum ranging from 12 to 30 years old ($x=17.1$, $SD=2.7$). Many residents (18.6%) added comments indicating that this was somewhat ambiguous question for them. This will be elaborated on in the discussion section.

Attitudes Toward Punishment

We asked our respondents twelve questions concerning their attitudes toward different types of punishment in a variety of situations (See Questionnaire Design Section for elaboration). To get the overall attitudes toward each method of punishment, we constructed indices by averaging the responses for the different situations within each punishment method. For example:

$$\text{Overall ATS (Attitude toward spanking)} = \frac{\text{ATS When child is noisy} + \text{ATS When child is disobedient} + \text{ATS When child gets in trouble at school}}{3}$$

Thus, as with the individual questions, the possible range of scores for each index ranged from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree).

In general, the respondents tended to agree with scolding as a viable punishment method for the situations provided in the questionnaire ($x=3.7$). The respondents strongly disagreed with beating children ($x=1.3$), and were undecided about sending children to their rooms ($x=3.3$).

The four attitude indices (attitudes toward scolding, spanking, beating, and sending children to their rooms) were analyzed according to specific demographic variables were: city, age, ethnicity, educational level, SES, sex, marital status, number of people living in the home, and number of children in the home.

There were no significant differences concerning attitudes toward scolding except for the demographic variable of education. Education was classified into four levels: none to 11 years of

schooling, high school graduate, some college, and college graduate and above. It was found that those respondents who had some college agree more often with scolding as a mode of punishment than the other three groups of education ($F(3,90)=3.86$, p .05).

There were no significant differences in attitudes toward spanking among any of the demographic variables considered.

Two demographic variables yielded significant differences in attitudes toward beating: ethnicity and sex. Ethnicity was analyzed in the terms of white and non-white groups. Whites tended to disagree with beating as a method of punishment more strongly than non-whites ($F(1,94)=4.74$, p .05). Differences were found between males and females in their attitudes toward beating in that females disagreed more strongly than males ($F(1,94)=22.31$, p .01).

No significant differences were found in attitudes toward sending children to their rooms for all but one variable, the number of children living in the home. This variable was divided into four categories: no children, one child, two children, and three or more children. Those who had one child disagreed more than the other groups in sending children to their rooms ($F(3,910=3.14$, p .05).

The attitude measures were also reanalyzed to include only those respondents who had children living at home. There were no differences among the demographic variables except education and SES and these differences were only for attitudes toward beating. Those in the college graduate and above group did not disagree as strongly in attitudes toward beating as the other educational groups

($F(3,54)=3.24$, $p < .05$). It must be kept in mind when interpreting these findings, that educational level and SES often measure very similar characteristics.

We asked these respondents who had children living at home to indicate how many times a week they utilized various methods of discipline. The methods of discipline were: scolding, having a heart-to-heart talk, threaten with punishment, spanking, put on restriction, beating, punish more severely than those methods, and punish less severely than these methods. These frequencies were added together to form a total punishment index ($x=24.4$, $SD=49.9$). We also looked for significant differences in total punishment across the various demographic variables. No significant differences were found.

Finally, we analyzed the relationship between the four attitude indices and reported punishment practices by a Pearson correlation. All the correlations between the attitudes and behaviors were negatively correlated, although not statistically significant (See Table 1). Thus, those who disagreed more with punishment, interestingly, do report that they punish more.

Insert Table 1 about here

DISCUSSION

In general, the survey method appears to be a successful technique in obtaining incidence and attitude information in the area of child punishment. Our response rate (34%) was higher than the usual response rate for mail questionnaires (20-25%). Much information was obtained at a minimal cost, with only one follow-up postcard prompting such a sizeable response rate. Many of our respondents were stimulated by the questionnaire and provided comments and useful feedback. Some individuals requested results of our survey, some stated that they enjoyed filling out the questionnaire, and many provided lengthy anecdotes regarding their punishment practices. The following are some of the more frequent issues addressed in the feedback.

Many of our respondents indicated an objection to the term "Anglo" (used in the survey) as an ethnic label. The term was crossed out and "Caucasian" or "white" was written in. Perhaps it would be better in future research to omit the term "Anglo" and substitute "Caucasian" for it.

For the marital status question, the respondents were provided with four alternatives: single, married or living together, divorced or separated, and widowed. Several respondents, when choosing the married or living together alternative, crossed out living together or circled married. This may be an indication of an objection to living together or it may merely be a clarification.

Perhaps, in an attempt to avoid offending respondents, it may be better to list married and living together as two separate alternatives.

Many respondents indicated (18.6%) that one of our questions in particular (At what age should a child act like an adult?) was ambiguous. Specifically, there was confusion about what "acting like an adult" actually meant. This ambiguity could possibly be alleviated by conducting the survey in a face-to-face manner. However, as part of a written questionnaire, perhaps the question could be reworded in terms of unrealistic expectations toward children or parent-child role reversal. Since this question apparently requires much clarification, it should be reworded or eliminated from the questionnaire.

Some respondents indicated confusion over the definitions (particularly scolding and beating). Again, this problem could be ameliorated by employing a face-to-face interview session. For a written questionnaire, however, vignettes offering explicit examples of the punishment methods in the various situations would be clearer than the way the questions were provided.

The unexpected response to our request in Spanish (5% of our total response rate) indicated that for the Southern California area, it would be beneficial to provide surveys in both English and Spanish.

In summary, our results indicated that most people were moderate in their attitudes toward various child punishment methods, agreeing

more with the less severe forms of punishment (scolding and sending children to their rooms) and disagreeing more with the more severe types of punishment (spanking and beating). Of special interest is the negative correlations between people's attitudes toward punishment and their reported punishment behavior. It seems that from our sample, what people believe in and what they actually do are two different issues. This should be further investigated, however, because of the generally low frequency of reported punishment.

In conclusion, our results demonstrated the feasibility of utilizing survey methods for research on styles of child discipline. The negative correlations between reports of attitudes and behaviors suggest the need for future research in an attempt to tap actual (as opposed to reported) behavior.

TABLE 1

Correlations Between Attitude Indices and Reported Punishment Behaviors

Punishment Behaviors	Attitude Indices			
	Scolding	Beating	Spanking	Sending to Room
Scold	-.1311	-.1367	-.0879	-.1270
Heart-to-Heart Talk	-.2610	-.0532	-.1218	-.1457
Threaten With Punishment	-.0737	-.1745	-.0447	-.0828
Spank	-.2336	-.0627	-.0491	-.2431
Restrict	-.1983	-.0147	-.0664	-.1132
Beat	---	---	---	---
Punish More Severely	.0907	-.0503	.0140	.0737
Punish Less Severely	.0460	-.1108	.0690	.0004
Total Punishment Index	-.2386	-.0815	-.0886	-.2002